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ABSTRACT

A two-part presentation on cross-cultural communication consists of a discussion of cultural differences in interpersonal communication and an article from a Greek English-language publication concerning telephone use skills in a foreign country. Cultural differences in communication are divided into eight types and illustrated: (1) when to talk; (2) what to say; (3) pacing and pausing; (4) the art of listening; (5) intonation; (6) what is conventional and what is not in a language; (7) degree of indirectness; and (8) cohesion and coherence. Examples of these observations about communications skills, found in one person's experience with answering telephones in Greece, are discussed. It is concluded that cross-cultural communication presents a double-bind: the need to be connected to others and the need not to be imposed upon and that, in certain cultural situations, individuals must compromise these needs in order to communicate. An analogy is made between cross-cultural communication and a route on which someone has turned the signs around: the familiar signposts are there, but they don't lead in the right direction. (MSE)

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CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION

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In my mind, cross-cultural communication is always closely related to teaching English as a second language because my interest in cross-cultural communication began when I taught English in Greece. They are related, however, in a more general way: every word spoken in an ESL classroom (and many words not spoken -- because when words that are expected are not spoken, that too has an effect on the interaction) is cross-cultural communication. In fact, in a heterogenous society like ours, just about every word spoken anywhere is cross-cultural communication, if it's communication at all. To justify this claim, I must explain what I mean by the term.

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First, what is culture? Culture is everything you have ever learned about how to communicate and how to think about things -- which comes down to the same thing. You learn all this in previous and ongoing interaction -- by talking to others, observing how they talk to you, and observing how others react to your ways of talking. And that is where the "cross-" comes in: we are exposed to different ways of talking depending not only on the country we grow up in and the language we speak but also on regional, ethnic, class, and even gender influences. (For example, my book CONVERSATIONAL STYLE: ANALYZING TALK AMONG FRIENDS (Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, 1984) presents numerous cross cultural differences in ways that New Yorkers and Californians have a casual conversation.)

My presentation here is in two parts. First, I suggest the range of aspects of communication that can vary from culture to culture by mentioning and exemplifying 8 kinds of differences. This is not an exhaustive list, but it gives an idea of the levels of communication on which differences can be found. The second part presents an article that appeared in THE ATHENIAN (an English-language magazine published in Greece) which reports the personal experience of an American answering the telephone in Greece. Using that as a basis, I then draw some principles about communication in general and cross-cultural communication in particular because, as I will explain, cross-cultural communication makes evident and intensifies the processes that are basic to all human communication.

I. LEVELS OF COMMUNICATION DIFFERENCES

What is it that can be culturally relative in communication? The answer is, just about everything -- all the aspects of what you say and how you say it.

1. WHEN TO TALK. To start on the most general level, the question of when to talk is different from culture to culture. This became apparent to me as I recently co-edited a collection of papers on the topic of silence with my colleague Muriel Saville-Troike (PERSPECTIVES ON SILENCE, Norwood, N.J.: Ablex, in press). Cultures differ with respect to what is defined as silence and when it is deemed appropriate.

People experience silence when they think there could or should be talk. If we are sitting together, I may think there's silence between us and you may not. In an article in the collection I co-edited, Ron Scollon points out that Athabaskan Indians consider it inappropriate to talk to strangers. Now this can yield very odd results when an Athabaskan is in a situation with a non-Athabaskan, white or black, who considers that the way to get to know someone is to talk. One

wants to get to know the other by talking, and the other feels it is inappropriate to talk until they know each other.

The result of this kind of difference is cross-cultural stereotyping. Non-Athabaskans conclude that Indians are sullen, uncooperative, even stupid, because they don't talk in situations where the non-Indians expect them to talk. And on the other side, as is dramatized in a book by Keith Basso among the Western Apache (PORTRAITS OF "THE WHITEMAN", Cambridge University Press, 1979), Athabaskan Indians have negative stereotypes of non-Athabaskans as ridiculously garrulous and also hypocritical because they act as if they're your friend when they're not.

Such mutual negative stereotypes are found in country after country. Those who expect more talk stereotype the more more silent group as uncooperative and stupid. Those who use less talk think of the more talkative group as pushy, hypocritical, and untrustworthy. This was found, for example, among Finns as compared to Swedes, according to Jaakko Lehtonen and Kari Sajavaara in another chapter in the same volume. The same pattern is seen in our own country in the mutual negative stereotypes of New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers.

2. WHAT TO SAY. Once you decide when to talk, what do you say? Can you ask questions, and what can you ask them about? Diana Eades tells us that Australian Aborigines never ask the question "Why?" Suzanne Scollon tells us that Alaskan Athabaskans rarely ask any questions. In these and other cultures, questions are regarded as too powerful to throw around, because they force a response.

We take it for granted that questions are basic to the educational setting. How would one learn anything if one didn't ask. Ester Goody found, however, that in a learning situation in Gonja, no questions were ever asked. As she puts it, Gonjans are so aware of the indirect function of questions to imply something else that "the pure information question hasn't got a chance."

A universal way of communicating is telling stories. But when do you tell them? How many can you tell? What can they be about? What can the point be, and how do you get to it?

In my research (as reported in the book CONVERSATIONAL STYLE) I found that New Yorkers of Jewish background were more likely than their California friends to tell stories, and their stories were more likely to be about their personal experience. The non-Jewish Californians in the conversation I studied tended to talk about events that happened to them without focusing on how they felt about those events.

Members of each group often responded to the stories told by members of the other group with subtle signs of impatience or incomprehension like "Yeah, and?" or "What does it mean?"

Stories are just one of a range of conversational acts which seem obviously appropriate when they pop out of our mouths but may not seem appropriate to those whose ears they pop into -- especially if the speaker and hearer are of different cultural background. For example, when and how and about what can you tell jokes? When is it appropriate to use irony and sarcasm, and how do you show it? When do you give or ask for advice and information -- and how? How and when do you give and take compliments?

An experience I had in Greece clued me in to the cultural convention involved in seemingly obvious ways of talking. In this case, it involved exchanging compliments. I was invited to join a dinner party at the home of a man who was an excellent cook. He had prepared an elaborate dinner including many small individually-prepared delicacies. I complimented the food during dinner: "These are delicious." My host agreed: "Yes, they are delicious." This struck me rather negatively; I didn't think the host should be complimenting his own food. I decided he was egotistical.

Then as I was leaving his house at the end of the evening, I thanked him for the wonderful meal. "What, those little nothings?" he retorted, with a wave of his hand and a self-deprecating grimace on his face. I was surprised again. I expected him to accept the compliment this time, saying something like, "The pleasure was mine; come again."

Then I realized that we differed not about whether compliments should be accepted or turned aside but rather which compliments should be accepted and which turned aside. What I interpreted as a personality characteristic was in fact cultural convention.

In cross-cultural communication it is difficult to assess personality characteristics, because such judgements are always measured against cultural standards. (This raises the intriguing question of the relationship between culture and personality.)

3. PACING AND PAUSING. The next level of cross-cultural difference is that of the conversational control mechanisms, pacing and pausing. How fast do you speak, and how long do you wait before another speaker finishes before you conclude s/he has no more to say? Differences in expectations about these matters can bring a conversation to an end.

If two people who are talking have even very slightly

different expectations about how long to wait between turns, then the person who expects a slightly shorter pause will take a turn first -- filling the pause while the other is still waiting for it. I had a British friend who I thought never had anything to say (which was becoming rather annoying) until I learned that she was waiting for a slight pause to take her turn, but that pause never occurred around me, because before it did, I perceived an uncomfortable silence which I kindly headed off by talking.

One might think that knowing someone a long time, you would get to know their style. But these reactions are automatic and their meaning seems self-evident. Furthermore, negative conclusions, such as the impression that someone has nothing to say, are constantly reinforced by what you observe to be their behavior. You have no reason to revise your evaluation.

Even being married is no proof against mutual misinterpretation. I am frequently thanked by readers and audience members who tell me that these kinds of slightly different habits account for misunderstandings that have plagued them their entire married lives. A slightly slower partner accuses a faster one of not giving them a chance to talk and not being interested in what they have to say. The slightly faster partner accuses the slower one of not talking to him or her, not saying what's on their mind.

This level of processing is automatic. You don't stop and ask yourself, "Now how many milliseconds shall I wait?" You simply perceive whether or not someone wants to talk and act accordingly.

4. LISTENERSHIP. Another level of processing in conversation that is automatic and taken for granted is showing listenership. One way is through gaze. Frederick Erickson found that white participants in his study maintained eye gaze when listening and frequently broke their gaze when speaking. Blacks in the study did the opposite. They maintained steady eye contact when speaking and frequently broke their gaze when listening.

This meant that when a white speaker talked to a black listener, s/he had the feeling that the black wasn't paying attention because the gaze wasn't there. And when the white speaker sent a small signal asking for confirmation of comprehension, the black often missed it because s/he was looking away. So the speaker then said the same thing again, in simpler terms -- talking down. When the white was the listener, the black speaker's steady gaze seemed overbearing.

I found that New Yorkers in my study had an enthusiastic

way of showing listenership -- for example, shouting "WOW!" or "NO KIDDING!" -- which frightened and confused the Californians and stopped them dead in their vocal tracks.

If your speaking habits create a strange reaction in someone you're speaking to, you don't realize that they're reacting to you. You think, instead, that they have strange speaking habits -- and are strange people. The New Yorkers never suspected why the Californians stopped. All they could see was that they kept hesitating and not getting on with their talk.

5. INTONATION. Another level of difference is intonation. Here I will borrow an example from the work of John Gumperz. There were complaints about rudeness by cafeteria employees from India and Pakistan who had been hired for jobs traditionally held by British women in London's Heathrow Airport employee cafeteria. The Asian women felt they were the object of discrimination.

When a customer coming through the cafeteria line requested meat, the employee had to find out if he wanted gravy on it. The British women asked, "Gravy?" The Asian women also said "Gravy," but instead of going up, their intonation went down at the end. During a workshop session, the Indian women said they couldn't see why they were getting negative reactions since they were saying the same thing as the British women. But the British women pointed out that although they were saying the same word, they weren't saying the same thing. "Gravy?" -- with the question intonation -- means "Would you like gravy?" The same word spoken with falling intonation seems to mean, "This is gravy. Take it or leave it."

Tiny differences in intonation can throw an interaction completely off without the speaker knowing that something s/he said caused the problem. Intonation is made up of differences in pitch, loudness, and rhythm -- features of talk we use both to show how we mean what we say, and to express special meanings. Cultures differ in how they use these little signals both to do conversational business as usual, and also to express special meanings or emotions.

Gumperz has shown, for example, that whereas speakers of British English use loudness only when they are angry, speakers of Indian English use it to get the floor. So when an Indian speaker is trying to get the floor, the British speaker thinks s/he is getting angry -- and gets angry in return. The result, both agree, is a heated interchange, but each thinks the other introduced the emotional tone into the conversation.

6. FORMULAICITY. The next level of cross-cultural difference is the question of what is conventional and what is novel in a language. When I first visited Greece, I had the

impression that one after another individual Greek that I met was a poetic soul -- until I heard the same poetic usage so often that I realized they were all uttering conventional truisms that sounded novel and poetic to me because I wasn't familiar with the convention.

Our own talk is full of figures of speech which we take for granted -- until we hear them fractured or altered by non-native speakers (or true poets).

7. INDIRECTNESS. Communication in any culture is a matter of indirectness. Only a small part of meaning is contained in the words spoken; the largest part is communicated by hints, assumptions, and audience filling-in from context and prior experience. Yet how to be indirect is culturally relative.

Americans as a group (I lump Americans as a group here, but I caution that Americans are not a group but are culturally heterogeneous, as I've been explaining) tend to ignore or even rail against indirectness. We believe that words should say what they mean and people should only be accountable for what they said in words. We tend to forget the importance of the interpersonal level of interaction and think that in some instances only the content counts.

This is the value associated with "getting down to brass tacks" and "sticking to facts" -- values taken for granted in American business and education, and perhaps more generally by American men. But it gets American businessmen in trouble when they try, for example, to skip the small talk and get right down to business with Japanese, Arab, or Mediterranean counterparts, for whom elaborate small talk must furnish the foundation for any business dealings.

Non-Americans, and American women, more often realize that much of what is meant cannot be said outright. This introduces the enormous problem, even within a culture, of figuring out what is meant that is not said. Cross-culturally it becomes a maddening guessing game that most entrants lose.

A quick example of indirectness: A Greek woman told me that when she asked her father (as a girl) or her husband (as an adult) whether or not she could do something, he would never say no. If he said "If you want, you can do it," she knew he didn't want her to. If he really thought it was a good idea he would be enthusiastic: "Yes, of course. Go." She knew from the way he waid yes whether he meant yes or no.

This strikes many Americans as hypocritical. Why didn't he say what he meant? Well he did say what he meant in a way she had no trouble understanding. But if a Greek-American

cousin came to visit the family and asked her uncle if she could do something and he answered in a way his daughter always understood, she would be likely to take his equivocal response literally. Although they spoke the same language -- Greek -- they would be victims of cross-cultural miscommunication.

Now that commerce with Japan is widespread there are frequent reports of frustration by Americans because polite Japanese never say no. One must understand from how they say yes whether or not they mean it. Since Americans don't know the system, they don't know what signals to look for -- even if they realize (which most don't) that yes might mean no.

8. COHESION AND COHERENCE. I have defined cohesion as "surface level ties showing relationships among elements" in discourse and coherence as "organizing structure making the words and sentences into a unified discourse that has cultural significance" (COHERENCE IN SPOKEN AND WRITTEN DISCOURSE, Ablex, in press).

I'll cite another example from Gumperz to illustrate cohesion. Indian speakers often emphasize the sentence immediately preceding their main point, and then utter the main point somewhat in a lower voice -- as if for dramatic effect. But British English speakers expect the main point to be emphasized, so by the time the Indian is saying the main point, the British listener has switched off.

Robert Kaplan illustrated differences in establishing coherence (though he didn't use that term) in ESL essays. Some very interesting current work on cross-cultural discourse structure is being done by Barbara Johnstone Koch on Arabic vs. English. Argumentation in Arabic, she shows, is by accretion and repetition -- highlighting by saying over and over the important point rather than building up to it, as Americans expect. To Americans, such repetition seems pointless and not like argumentation at all.

Habits of cohesion and coherence are very resistant to change. One who learns the vocabulary and syntax of a new language is likely to hang it on the paralinguistic and discourse structures of the native communicative system.

SUMMARY. We have seen many levels of differences on which cross-cultural communication can falter: When to talk, what to say, pacing and pausing, showing listenership, intonation, formulaicity, indirectness, and cohesion and coherence. This list also describes the linguistic ways that meaning is communicated in talk. This is no coincidence. Communication is, by its very nature, culturally relative.

II. AN EXAMPLE AND GENERAL PRINCIPLES

Now I will present the article from THE ATHENIAN and then use it as the basis for some generalizations about cross-cultural communication.

> In most countries, when people answer the telephone, they either start off with a cheery 'hello', or with their phone number or the name of their firm. In this country, one is usually met with a clipped, 'Embros!' ('Forward!' or 'Go ahead!') or with a guarded 'Nai?' or 'Malista?' ('Yes?').
>
> I have no idea how the 'embros' response originated but I suspect that the first telephones ever used in Greece must have belonged to the army. And since official conversation in the army is not particularly noted for its courteousness, the clipped and abrupt 'embros' came into being and eventually passed into civilian use.
>
> After twenty-five years of residence in this country, I am still slightly put out when I ring a number and hear the voice at the other end giving me the command to go forward. I start mumbling 'ah', and 'er', and the voice at the other end becomes more insistent, repeating 'Embros!' two or three times. By then I have become completely flustered and can't remember whom I was calling in the first place. And when I do remember and start to speak, the person at the other end has slammed the phone down.
>
> Sometimes when I dial a number I get a busy signal and sometimes nothing at all but, more often than not, I get a number that is completely different from the one I dialled. If the person at the other end waits long enough for me to get through my 'ahs' and 'ers' and realizes I have been connected with a wrong number, he abruptly utters the word 'lathos' (mistake) and cuts me off immediately. If I try again and, instead of a busy signal, I get the same wrong number, the next 'lathos' is louder and more scathing. I try to explain that I am dialling correctly but getting his number through no fault of my own but the person at the other end has already slammed the phone down and my explanations are lost into a dead receiver.

Once, instead of the laconic 'lathos', I was subjected to a curt lecture. 'My dear sir,' I was told, 'why the hell don't you learn to dial properly?' By the time I had gotten over the shock of this rudeness and thought of an appropriate reply, I was naturally cut off.

I myself try to be as polite as I can with people who ring another number and get mine instead. But it can be exasperating when the person at the other end is a peasant woman calling form some remote village in the hinterland.

'Mitso, is that you?' a shrill voice shouts into my ear.

'No, it is not Mitso. There is no Mitso here. You have the wrong number.'

'Where is Mitso? I want to speak to him!' the shrill voice goes on.

'There is no Mitso here. You have the wrong number,' I repeat.

'Wrong number? What wrong number? Where is Mitso?'

'What number are you calling?'

'Barba Stavro, is that you? I want to speak to Mitso. Where is he?'

'It is not Barba Stavro. You have the wrong number. Put your phone down and try again.'

'Who are you?'

I decide to try a different tack. 'What number are you calling?'

The shrill voice remains silent. There is a consultation at the other end that I cannot quite make out. Then the line is cut off. A few seconds later the phone rings again.

'Mitso, is that you?'

By this time I have had enough. I leave the phone off the hook and go into the kitchen to make myself a cup of coffee. By the time I

return and pick up the receiver again I can hear the woman engaged in an animated conversation with Mitso. How she ever got through to him on my open line I shall never know.

A friend of mine claims that he can tell whether a company is flourishing or not by the state of its lavatories. If they are bright and spotless, the company is doing well. If they are not, the company is obviously going down the drain. As I rarely use company toilets, I haven't been able to substantiate or disprove this contention. However, I do believe that the way a switchboard operator or a secretary answers the phone is a strong clue to the way a company is being run.

The company name and a bright and cheery 'Kalimera sas' (good morning) right up to the end of the day means the company is doing very well indeed, with a happy and efficient staff to keep it going. A tired voice barely pronouncing the company's name and nothing else is a bad omen. It is usually the trade mark of a government controlled corporation where nobody gives a damn, or of a company seething with labour troubles and cash-flow problems.

Secretaries who put you through to their bosses straight away after you have identified yourself are obviously working for a successful man who has nothing to fear from anyone. The ones who make you wait with an 'I'll see if he's in' -- the most often-repeated lie in our modern world -- are manifestly working for a man who is full of hang-ups and probably can't cope with his job.

Hotel switchboard operators are a race apart. They know everything that is going on in the hotel, probably by listening in on everybody's conversations. There is one luxury hotel in Athens (which shall remain nameless) whose switchboard operators are the friendliest and most uninhibited girls in the business. Typical responses from this hotel are:

'Mrs. Haggerty? Is that the red-haired Irish-American lady with the husband who has a sinus condition? Ah, well, she went out about fifteen minutes ago to buy some Greek embroidery. She'll probably be back soon. Can I take a message?'

Or else: 'Mr. Ferguson? No, I'm afraid he's

out. He had an appointment at ten at the Ministry of Coordination and you know what they're like there. He probably won't be back till after two. Do you want to speak to his wife? She's sitting in the lounge waiting for him and I expect she's bored stiff. Hang on a minute and I'll have her paged for you.'*

Let me say first the the reason I clipped this article more than five years ago and kept it hanging on my wall for more than half that time, is not only that it's funny -- or, rather, the reason it is so funny to me -- is that it describes perfectly the response I had to Greek conventions for answering the telephone and performing other such fleeting encounters which did not seem funny to me at the time but caused me no end of hurt feelings and negative evaluations. The observations I will now make about cross-cultural communication based on this example are not intended to imply that Kitroeff was wrong in anything he wrote. Quite the contrary, he was eloquently and beautifully right in all he observed. But I want to step to a different level of abstraction to analyze the situation -- a level of abstraction that Kitroeff may well have been aware of, but which it would not have been appropriate for him to articulate in this article, because his goal (bless him) was not to analyze but to describe and amuse.

Note first that Kitroeff talks not about different conventions for telephone talk but about what he perceives as personality -- people's intentions. He assumes that his concept of what's polite is universal. This shows up even in the adjectives he uses to describe his experience: I suspect "a cheery hello" sounds "cheery" to him (rather than, say, saccharine or silly) because it's what he expects. On the other hand, the "clipped and abrupt emros" and the "guarded 'Nai?'" ('Yes?') sound so by comparison to what he is used to. He has an emotional response to the way he is addressed on the phone and evaluates the intentions of the speaker by that response. Similarly, he calls the woman's voice "shrill" and says she is "shouting" because her volume and pitch are higher than he expects.

It may be that the woman who calls his house talks on and on because he encouraged her to, by not saying, as soon as he realized she had the wrong number, "LATHOS!" and hanging up -- like any normal Greek would. By not doing what was normal in that system, he misled her. She kept demanding to speak to Mitso because he kept talking to her -- giving the impression that she must be talking to someone who knows

* Alec Kitroeff, The Athenian, October, 1977, p. 19. Reprinted by permission.

her. Her only problem then was to figure out who it was.

You have seen yourself, I am sure, in the position of this woman: behaving in a way that is rather bizarre because others are behaving in ways that seem strange to you. You assume, all the while, that the other is always the same person. If he is acting strangely right now, he is a strange person. But we see ourselves as many different people: I'm only acting strangely right now because the situation is strange -- or because you are! This is not my normal behavior. (This is very relevant to a classroom situation, which becomes natural for the teacher, who has gotten used to it, but may be a very strange situation to many of the students.

Another general truth about communication which is illustrated in this example is what anthropoligist Gregory Bateson called COMPLEMENTARY SCHISMOGENESIS (STEPS TO AN ECOLOGY OF MIND, N.Y.: Ballantine, 1977). We expect that if people whose styles differ have a chance to communicate frequently, they will accommodate each other and become more similar. This sometimes happens, and the phenomenon has been studied by psychologists under the rubric of accommodation theory, for example by Howard Giles. But Bateson points out that often, in such circumstances, rather than becoming more congruent in extended interaction, each one's style drives the other to more extreme forms of the differing behavior. This is complementary schismogenesis. Then each one ends up exhibiting behaviors that are extreme even for him or her.

That happens in our example. When Kitroeff hears the abrupt answer "embros," he is caught off guard. As a result, he hesitates and falters, which drives the Greek phone answerer to more insistent and peremptory forms of speech which distress Kitroeff even more, until he completely forgets who he was calling. Each one gets more exaggerated in his own style. Similarly, the Californians in my study were caught off guard by the style of the New Yorkers, consequently became more tentative and hesitant, and thus incited the New Yorkers to become more directly encouraging -- in their style.

Kitroeff's experience on the phone also demonstrates the uselessness of formulas with those who don't recognize them. He tried to let the Greek caller know she had gotten the wrong number by asking, "What number do you want?" This sounds very logical to him (and to us), but really it is a conventional expression by which we let callers know the number they have reached is not the one they want. We don't really need to know what number they want, and in the vast majority of cases, we already know it isn't our number before we ask that. However it seems more polite to make sure before pronouncing the call a wrong number. The Greek woman,

I imagine, did not answer these questions not because she couldn't but because she wasn't used to that convention, so the question didn't make any sense to her.

The last observation I will make about this example is somewhat depressing in terms of the prognosis for cross-cultural communication: the resilience of our conventional habits. Kitroeff had lived in Greece for 25 years and still had not gotten used to Greek ways of answering the phone. After all that time, it still seemed rude. Of course he is not unique nor even unusual in this. In the early years of our lives, we develop ingrained notions of politeness and rudeness which come to seem self-evident and arguably logical. A lifetime of exposure to different conventions may drive us to distraction but will not make us question our assumptions -- unless out of the ordinary processes, like brain-washing or studying cross-cultural communication, intervene. In the latter case, we may come to understand the cultural relativity of such notions as politeness and rudeness, but we are not likely to change our automatic emotional reactions to ways of talking.

A MODEL FOR COMMUNICATION

Cross-cultural communication highlights the processes that underly all communication. As Ron Scollon points out in an article entitled "The Rhythmic Integration of Ordinary Talk", all communication is a double bind. We have to balance two conflicting needs which linguists call negative and positive face but which I like to think of as involvement and independence: the needs to be connected to others and to not be imposed on. It's a double bind (another term from Bateson) because honoring one of the needs entails violating the other, and we can't step out of the situation. We can't not communicate.

This double bind is particularly painful in cross-cultural communication, where we find ourselves protesting, "Hey, I'm just like you -- don't treat me differently!" This needs no explanation. But then we find ourselves protesting, "Hey, I'm different from you -- I need special consideration!" All the cross-cultural differences I have described will result in misunderstandings if special consideration is not made. Such consideration should be made, I believe, but because of the double bind, any such special consideration violates the desire not to be seen as different.

CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION ISN'T ALL BAD

So as not to end on a negative note, I will give two examples of recent research which found that cross-cultural

communication, even when it is not, strictly speaking, successful, nonetheless can have positive rather than negative effects. Siti Suprapto studied the talk between an Indonesian gynecologist and his American patients. One cross-cultural misunderstanding that repeatedly occurred was that the doctor used laughter in a way that is conventional in Indonesia -- to smooth over embarrassing situations. He giggled when he mentioned potentially embarrassing topics to his patients. The women had no idea that he was using an Indonesian convention. But they liked his laughing, which they interpreted as a personality characteristic. They thought he was easygoing, friendly, and nice. He made them comfortable. In a clinic setting, many women who returned for subsequent visits specifically requested the doctor who laughs a lot.

A second example is from a study by Carolyn Adger of a multi-ethnic classroom. The children in the first grade class, who came from a wide variety of backgrounds, did learn to get along. In particular, Adger studied arguments between two boys, one American black and one Vietnamese, who became best friends and sought out each other's company.

These two boys had very different ideas about how to win an argument. The black child felt that he had to get the last word. The Vietnamese child, who came from a culture that values displays of harmony, was happy if he could say something conciliatory and thus see himself as a peacemaker. He sought oneupmanship over the long haul, by getting a jibe in later. Because of their cross-cultural differences, it was possible for both boys to feel they had come out well in the same argument.

CONCLUSION

Cross-cultural communication is like trying to follow a route on which someone has turned the signposts around. All the familiar signposts are there, but when you follow them they don't lead you in the right direction.

Cross-cultural communication exhibits the benefits and problems of all communication in extreme form. In a paper given at the Georgetown University Round Table on Languages and Linguistics in 1981, A. L. Becker quotes Ortega y Gasset as saying that all communication is exuberant and deficient. It's deficient because what we say never communicates exactly what we have in mind in all its ramifications and associations. It's exuberant because our listeners see ramifications and associations which we don't intend to communicate, as well as impressions of us. This

is true in all communication, because all communication is to some degree cross-cultural: no two people have exactly the same communicative background. In situations that are more decidedly cross-cultural: among speakers of different languages from different countries -- the exuberancies and deficiencies are proportionately greater.

The issue of cross-cultural communication is at the very heart of being human. If you find, over time, that your ways of saying things are misunderstood, that your intentions are misperceived, you start to think you are crazy. You question your very sense of being in the world. This, I think, is what happens in that phenomenon we've all experienced, culture shock. Sadly, it's a feeling many ESL students have much of the time.

At the end of a classic paper on the coherence system of Javanese Shadow Theatre, Becker points out that foreign language learning has a lot in common with schizophrenia: the experience of not being able to establish a sense of coherence in the world, of not being a right sort of person whom others understand.

What can we do about these problems? Understanding itself is a powerful tool. If we can talk to our students about the problems they are having in getting themselves understood, the feelings they have when their intentions are misinterpreted and when they find others behaving incomprehensibly or (as it seems to them) badly; if we can let them know that there are very concrete reasons for such disturbances in cross-cultural communication, then a great part of the self-doubt may be at least partly soothed. If we all remind ourselves that others may not have understood what they said, it may go a long way to make all foreign language learners and all communicators a little more sane.